BRAIN HEALTH BOOST

Reading Provides a Lifetime of Brain Health Benefits

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Today we talk about how important reading is for a healthy and high performing brain.**

Many of us love to get lost in the pages of a good book, but is reading just a pleasurable activity or are there real benefits to reading books? Research suggests that reading is good for our brain health and those benefits can last a lifetime.

In addition to strengthening the brain and increasing our vocabulary, studies show that reading can reduce stress, improve our mood, and help us get a good night's sleep. Reading activates a complex network of circuits in the brain. One study using functional magnetic-resonance imaging (fMRI) scans of people reading a novel showed increased brain connectivity as the story grew more intense, and that connectivity lasted for days afterward.

The effects of reading are cumulative, and they begin in early childhood. An article from Harvard Medical School points out that learning to read means we must be able to decode the words, have the vocabulary to know the meaning of the words, and read fluently enough so that all of these elements can come together in order for us to comprehend what we are reading.

New research suggests that those necessary steps in our brain development begin in infancy. A child's brain develops the capacity for language through activities such as listening to stories, talking, and interacting with parents and caregivers, or looking at pages in a book. In a new study reported by the Harvard Graduate School of Education researchers showed the formation and organization of white matter, the material that makes up the pathways that connect different parts of the brain, can be seen in infants as young as four months old.

Reading to our children beginning as a newborn can build strong pathways in the brain. And while it is important to introduce our kids when they are young, it's never too late to begin taking advantage of the many benefits that live in the pages of a good book.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Reading offers many benefits to developing, mature and aging brains, enhancing your brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness. Here are just some of the benefits you can experience from reading, from the BHI and [Healthline](#).

- **Strengthens your brain.** Research shows that reading literally changes your brain. Reading involves a complex network of circuits and signals in the brain. As your reading ability matures, those networks also get stronger and more sophisticated.
- **Boosts school performance.** Reading with children builds warm and happy associations with books and boosts their school performance by increasing their vocabulary and building communication skills.
- **Increases empathy.** People who read literary fiction show a heightened emotional intelligence including the ability to understand the feelings and beliefs of others.
- **Builds vocabulary.** Researchers have found that students who read books regularly, beginning at a young age, gradually develop large vocabularies.
- **Prevents age-related cognitive decline.** Reading books and magazines keeps your mind engaged as you grow older. Reading may not prevent Alzheimer's, but studies have found that people who engage in mentally stimulating activities all their lives are less likely to develop the plaques, lesions, and tau-protein tangles found in the brains of people with dementia.
- **Reduces stress.** Studies show that 30 minutes of reading can lower risk factors of brain illness including your blood pressure, heart rate, and feelings of psychological distress.
- **Helps you get a good night's rest.** Reading can help you relax and fall asleep. But for best results, read an actual book and not an e-book since the light from your device could keep you awake.
- **Relieves symptoms of depression.** If you are feeling alone or isolated, reading fiction can help you temporarily escape in the imagined world of the book's characters. Nonfiction self-help books can help teach you strategies that may help you manage symptoms of brain illness.
- **Helps you live longer.** Studies have shown that adults who read books tend to live longer than people who don't read.
- And don't forget to *BE BRAIN HEALTHY* **and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose
  - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
  - Engaging with nature

o General health
o Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)
The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and optimization of performance.* The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the **Be Brain Healthy** movement, **because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.** **To view all Brain Health Boosts click here.**